

“A Called Life”
(I Samuel 13: 1-19 Matthew 4: 18-22)
Sermon by Ellis B. Johnson
January 27, 2008

I want to ask each of you two questions this morning. The first is, “What’s waking you up at night?” It’s a question asked in a brochure from Andover Newton Theological School inviting prospective students to visit the campus for conversation about their “call to ministry.” It is a reference to today’s first lesson which is the account of God’s call to Samuel. Young Samuel was living in the temple, helping the aging priest, Eli, and when he hears his name called in the night, he’s sure it’s Eli calling. He doesn’t recognize God’s call because even though he’s spent his entire life in the Lord’s house, “He does not yet know the Lord.” At Eli’s instructions, the next time Samuel hears God calling, he responds, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” And Samuel’s response to the call of God is the turning point in his life. No longer will he be a temple lackey; now he will be the Lord’s prophet – open to what God would say through him.

So, again, the question, “What wakes you up in the night?” Sooner or later, most of us have conversations with ourselves on a perspiration soaked pillow at three in the morning, don’t we? But it may sound nothing like the voice of God. “Sure, I wake up at three a.m., but it’s to worry if my daughter will get into her first choice of colleges, how am I going to pay the bills, or if that lump is malignant. I’m sure not awakened by God’s voice!” But I wonder if we don’t have too limited a perspective on God’s ways. Frederick Buechner writes, “God speaks to us, I would say, much more often than we realize. His message is not written out in starlight, which in the long run would not make much difference, rather it is written out for each of us in the humdrum, helter-skelter events of each day...” Can you hear the call of God in the “humdrum, helter-skelter events of each day? Samuel thought it was Eli’s voice that he was hearing. So it is just possible that it is God who is speaking to us in those three a.m. conversations that we have with ourselves. I think there is often some Eli who is wise enough to help us listen and to recognize God’s voice in the humdrum everyday voices.

In the religion-soaked culture in which I grew up, all the ministers I knew claimed a dramatic sense of calling, often accompanied by audible voices. (After I had a few psychology courses, I didn’t doubt that they heard voices!) From the time I was the age of Samuel, I felt that I wanted to be a minister, but I was concerned that I couldn’t claim any kind of dramatic call and I sure didn’t hear voices. When, as a senior in high school, I went for a college weekend with other students considering training for ordained ministry, I had the added concern that my doubts were every bit as strong as my faith. The minister from the college who was in charge of the weekend experience was a polished professional with “big hair”. But he invited a country preacher from out in the county, (these would be the churches most of us would be serving) to add a different perspective and he got more than he bargained for. The country preacher looked into our young, eager faces, and said, “If you can possibly imagine yourself doing anything else with your life, don’t even think about getting into this frustrating business of ministry!

I've already quit ten times this week and it's only Friday." The polished professional minister went immediately to a damage control mode, responding cheerily, "Well, as long as you didn't quit to God!" Not to be trumped, the country preacher said, "Are you kidding, I've quit twenty times to God this week!" I loved this guy immediately! I had never experienced that kind of honesty from a minister or known one who had that authentic a relationship with God. Plus, my doubts seemed as nothing compared to this guy. He was my Eli. We all need an Eli. When your heart is "strangely warmed", you need someone to help you discern whether it is the voice of God or the late night pepperoni pizza. So, "What's waking you up at night?"

Samuel's call was not to the priesthood. He was rather called to truth telling and the painful thing is that the one who needed to hear the truth was his beloved mentor, Eli. Eli was the last gasp of a failed priestly order that had exhausted its authority and its credibility. And the hereditary priesthood had hit the bottom of the gene pool with Eli's two loutish sons who were walking arguments for a celibate priesthood, using their positions in the temple for their self-serving purposes. But Eli had integrity and he could tell that young Samuel's message was indeed, from God, by its truthfulness.

Which brings us to the second question of the morning, "How's your sermon coming?" You may not know this, but ministers are always working on their next sermon in their mind, which is why we often have that blank look on our faces. But the "perspiration" that goes with the "inspiration" usually comes late in the week. So if you're at a clergy gathering on a Thursday and a colleague asks casually, "So, how's your sermon coming?" It can only mean that his or hers is wrapped up and in the can! There's no preening quite like one minister asking another, "How's your sermon coming?" But this morning, I re-direct that question to you out of the conviction that everyone in the church has a sermon in them just waiting to get out, and that sermon is the life of faith that you live. I'm sure you've heard the marvelous dictum of St. Francis, who said, "Preach Christ every day; if necessary, use words." I'm relatively sure that our most effective sermons are the ones where we don't need words. (I'm sure that's the case when it comes to politicians!) We need to get over the idea that a call is only to representative or ordained ministry. The whole idea of the Reformation is that every Christian has a vocation and the most important vocations are lived out in the work-a-day world. And we shouldn't have some preconceived notion of what Christian vocation looks like. Howard Thurman was fond of saying, "In coming to God, you should follow the grain of your own wood. If you think you have to twist yourself out of shape and be something you're not in coming to God, then you've misunderstood somewhere along the line." To put it another way, God calls you with your unique gifts, warts and all!

I learned very early in my ministry the price of a call to lay ministry that goes unrecognized. During graduate school, I was the associate pastor of a large church in a working class neighborhood. During the summer, a seminarian and I were running a "teen lounge" in the church basement. We were getting about two hundred teenagers a night off the street, many of whom were a work in progress. One evening, the seminarian greeted me by saying, "I just took a pistol away from this guy over here; I hid it in the coffee urn; and I quit." Amazingly, most of the church was supportive of this ministry in

spite of the “wear and tear” on their beautiful building. The exception was the meanest women to ever draw breath. (I know you’re saying, “He doesn’t know my Aunt Hilda”, but your Aunt Hilda is a pussycat compared to this woman.) She was a nurse in the local hospital, but her real passion was making my life miserable by opposing everything I did. Later in the summer, after a rainy camping trip, I developed an upper respiratory infection which was miss-diagnosed as a heart attack and I was taken to the local hospital. I awoke from a snooze to see the meanest woman in the world, dressed in white standing beside my bed. I thought I’d died and gone to hell! But she planted herself there and helped my soul heal while the medical care-givers were helping my body heal, and we helped her develop a lay visitation ministry that became the life-blood of that church. She was just frustrated because she had a calling to lay ministry that was not being heard.

All of us are called to the ministry of “following Jesus” no matter what our work or profession may be. What does it mean to “follow Jesus”? I don’t think it means to imitate Jesus; that’s a caricature. But I do believe it is to live our lives with the same integrity with which Jesus lived his life. And I believe it is to love the way Jesus loved. And we usually know, all too well, when we are called to follow Jesus. In the nineteen fifties, well before the south was integrated, Clarence Jordan formed a racially integrated Christian Community called Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia. Jordan was not a carpet-bagger from the north, rather had grown up in the area and had family there. The good folks of Koinonia Farm were integrated six days a week, but on Sunday attended worship at segregated churches. Clarence Jordan’s brother was very sympathetic to the cause, so Clarence asked him to help them integrate some worship services at the local churches. His brother said, “Clarence, you know I can’t do that! I live in this town; I’ve got to make a living for my family in this town; and that would be impossible if I joined you in integrating those churches.” Instead of saying, “Oh, that’s ok; I understand”, Clarence said to his brother, “I remember the night you and I got saved, we stood up together before the congregation in the Baptist Church and promised to be a follower of Jesus. You need to call up the deacons and tell them you’ve changed your mind. You need to tell them to list you not as a follower of Jesus, but as an Admirer of Jesus.” Well I sympathize with Clarence Jordan’s brother, because I’d really rather be an admirer of Jesus. I remember comedian Flip Wilson in his “Church of What’s Happening Now and Bar B-Q pit”, used to say that he was a “Jehovah’s By-stander.” He said he wanted to be a Jehovah’s Witness, but he didn’t have enough faith! But sometimes when we’re just standing there admiring Jesus, he calls us to step off the curb and go along with him. We can’t always know where He’s asking us to follow him; (Peter and Andrew had no idea) we just know that we’ll learn what it means to follow him along the way. So what’s waking you up at night? Behind those anxious voices that we hear at three a.m. may be the voice of God, asking a question: “How’s your sermon coming?”